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GRALEY HERREN

DELLILO VARIATIONS: A CONTRAPUNTAL READING OF
"COUNTERPOINT," *THE BODY ARTIST*, AND *LOVE-LIES-BLEEDING*

The eccentric genius Glenn Gould is one of the guiding muses in Don DeLillo's contemplative 2004 essay, "Counterpoint: Three Films, a Book, and an Old Photograph." Gould first earned international acclaim in the mid-1950s for his recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. This notoriously complex piece is structured as a variation set: Bach establishes an aria, follows it with thirty variations on the initial theme, and returns to the beginning with an aria da capo. The filmmakers of *Thirty Two Short Films about Glenn Gould* likewise adopt a contrapuntal approach for their character study of the mercurial artist. DeLillo constructs his "Counterpoint" essay in similar fashion, using juxtaposition and variation to develop thematic relationships between solitude, madness, art, and death in the lives and works of Gould, Thelonious Monk, and Thomas Bernhard.

DeLillo's own oeuvre invites contrapuntal consideration as well. Early in his career, he seemed determined to reinvent himself with every novel, experimenting with one subgenre after another: the artistic apprenticeship novel (*Americania*), sports (*End Zone*), music (*Great Jones Street*), science fiction (*Ratner's Star*), and cloak-and-dagger thrillers (*Players* and *Running Dog*). The highly accomplished mature works of DeLillo's mid-career—*The Names*, *White Noise*, *Libra*, *Mao II*, and his magnum opus *Underworld*—cemented his reputation as the most penetrating literary chronicler of late-twentieth century American life. Throughout his diverse works, DeLillo returned again and again to certain predominant themes, and in his post-*Underworld*, twenty-first century work for page and stage, these recurring preoccupations have crystallized into urgent obsessions. The late DeLillo aesthetic focuses unblinkingly on the role of the artist to interrogate and mediate time, identity, and mortality. But to say that DeLillo returns obsessively to these core themes is not to say that his work has become redundant or predictable. In fact, what is

most remarkable is the striking variety and medium-specific nuance he brings to bear on each new variation upon his themes. In "Counterpoint" DeLillo observes, "Gould's second recording of the *Goldberg Variations* was made twenty-six years after his first rendition and is somber and slower, far more contemplative. He is not only reimagining Bach but engaging in a form of *corrective self-dialogue*" (44, emphasis added). The same dynamics of corrective self-dialogue animate DeLillo's late work. Taking my cues from DeLillo, Gould, and Bach, the present essay takes a contrapuntal approach to three late works, the essay "Counterpoint" (2004), the novella *The Body Artist* (2000), and the play *Love-Lies-Bleeding* (2005). DeLillo uses the medium-specific conditions of printed prose and performed drama to explore his signature obsessions in strikingly different ways. Each of these reflexive self-dialogues is provocative in its own right but considered in counterpoint, the "DeLillo Variations" constitute an important triptych within his late oeuvre. Performance art is central to all three works; indeed, DeLillo's increasing attention to performance constitutes one of the central features of his late aesthetic.

"Counterpoint: Three Films, a Book, and an Old Photograph" appeared in the journal *Grand Street* four years after the publication of *The Body Artist* and several months before the stage premiere of *Love-Lies-Bleeding*. This work of creative non-fiction serves effectively as a thematic bridge between the other two fictional works. The three movies referenced in the title are *The Fast Runner* (based on an Inuit legend about Atanarjuaq), *Thirty Two Short Films about Glenn Gould* (a film which includes dramatic enactments as well as interviews with people who knew the enigmatic virtuoso), and *Straight, No Chaser* (a documentary about jazz innovator Thelonious Monk). The titular book is *The Loser*, a novel about Glenn Gould by the relentlessly intense Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard. The old photograph refers to an image hanging on the wall of DeLillo's writing room. It captures the Mount Rushmore of the 1950s New York jazz scene: Monk on piano, bassist Charles Mingus, drummer Roy Haynes, and saxophonist Charlie Parker playing in the Village in 1953. The essay riffs back and forth between these eclectic artists, developing motifs close to the heart of DeLillo's own work.

Among the essay's several photos, the first is most emblematic: a naked runner sprints across a frozen white landscape, fleeing for his life from a distant pack of pursuers. "In *The Fast Runner*, Atanarjuaq, racing, naked, is a man reacting to a primal danger; there are other men who want to kill him. But he may also resemble an individual trying to reestablish his sense of isolation, his natural place in the landscape" ("Counterpoint" 46). From the beginning, most of DeLillo's works have featured at least one major figure who feels hounded into retreat by a hostile world. In his first published interview, he was asked by Tom LeClair about the tendency of his characters to withdraw from the world. DeLillo explained, "They feel instinctively that there's a certain struggle, a solitude they have to confront. The landscape is silent, whether it's a desert, a small room, a hole in the ground. *The voice you have to answer is your own*" (8, emphasis added). Ascetic withdrawal into meditative isolation is, according to DeLillo, a fundamental precondition to producing art. He identifies this same impulse in Glenn Gould, a Canadian by nationality and a lone wanderer of the metaphysical North. According to DeLillo, "The artist is an adept of solitude living at the edge of that psychic immensity; the other-world of ice and time and wintry introspection" ("Counterpoint" 38). Following a compass that always points away, an inner compulsion toward solitude so crucial to artistic achievement, involves great personal risk. The ascetic places himself at odds with society, a stance DeLillo defines in terms of *counterpoint*: "In older cultures, the solitary man is a malignant figure. He threatens the well-being of the group. But we know him because we encounter him, in ourselves and others. He lives in counterpoint, a figure in the faint distance. This is who he is, lastingly alone" (47-49). The group may feel threatened by the individual's secession, and the loner is also threatened by the corrosive effects of prolonged isolation. Solitude can foster genius, but it can also breed madness and crippling loneliness. As DeLillo notes, "The prisoner is thrown into solitary. He is alone, confined, sequestered. This is the harshest punishment the state allows, short of outright execution" (46). DeLillo's vacillation between a romanticized image of the remote artist and a cautionary image of the indigent prisoner serves to remind that quests which begin on the moun-

tantop in search of enlightenment can end in the madhouse of psychic disintegration and self-annihilation.

The voice you have to answer is your own. Delillo's opinion has not altered since he made that declaration to LeClair, though his estimation of the cost for this self-dialogue has increased with age. At the heart of "Counterpoint," Delillo launches into a verbal jazz solo riffing on various dead-end attempts to explain away or pathologize the solitary lives led by Gould, Monk, and Bernhard:

First there is the gradation of language, a sense of deepening threat played out in the terms themselves. Introspection, solitude, isolation, anxiety, phobia, depression, hallucination, schizophrenia. Then there are the human referents. He is free from convention; or there is something scanted in his humanity; or he is trapped in a modern context, bearing some taint of estrangement that makes him uneasy in the world; or it's a result of upbringing maybe; or he's a goddamn genius—leave him alone; or the matter is strictly clinical, a question of brain chemistry; or it's a natural state in fact, some dread that lingers in the early brain, the snake brain, outside the slanted limits of all the things he has shored against it. (49)

But for all these pigeon-holing rationalizations, Delillo distills the artist's solitary quest down to a single driving question: "How close to the self can we get without losing everything?" (49)

Who or what or where is "the self"? How does one get close enough to it to risk losing everything? The postmodern era with which Delillo is most commonly associated has little truck with antiquated absolutes like the essential, unified self. However, this does not prevent several characters in his recent work from reopening the closed subject of the Subject, the True Self. For instance, war theoretician Richard Elster is introduced into the novel *Point Omega* through his observations on the "true life": "The true life is not reducible to words spoken or written, not by anyone, ever. The true life takes place

when we're alone, thinking, feeling, lost in memory, dreamingly self-aware, the submicroscopic moments" (17). Later Elster describes the true life like a Proustian epiphany of the self's confrontation with its own mortality: "A moment, a thought, here and gone, each of us, on a street somewhere, and this is everything. [. . .] It's what we call self, the true life, he said, the essential being. It's self in the soft wallow of what it knows, and what it knows is that it will not live forever" (63). Delina Treadwell, the confession-seeking, death-dealing talk show host in the play *Valparaiso*, invokes the concept more crudely and succinctly: "Then call it the self. I want your naked shimost self" (91). Of course, Elster and Delina are dubious sources of knowledge, so we shouldn't necessarily take their words for it. Delillo's depiction of identity is more complex, contingent, elusive, diffuse, and, most interestingly in the present context, more *performative*.

His most revealing commentary with respect to the dangerous pursuit of self comes in his reflections on fellow novelist Thomas Bernhard. Delillo makes no claims to membership among the madmen-geniuses he studies in "Counterpoint." But he does know a thing or two about writing, so he speaks with hard-won authority when he turns from Gould's classical music and Monk's jazz to Bernhard's novel *The Loser*. He pushes a provocative line of inquiry: "To what extent is Bernhard himself speaking to the reader?" ("Counterpoint" 41) As with all rhetorical questions, the answer is asserted in the asking: Bernhard expresses himself to the reader through the guise of his narrator. Here Delillo the reader commits the very offense that Delillo the novelist has consistently discouraged in numerous interviews; namely, he equates the novel's narrator and characters to mouthpieces for the novelist himself. In so doing, Delillo indirectly sheds significant light on his own creative process and that of the artist-characters who preside over several of his works. "There are shadings of identity among author, narrator, and character. There is the doubling of Bernhard/Gould and also the split between Bernhard the pianist and Bernhard the novelist" ("Counterpoint" 41). These shadings of identity between the artist and his/her creations, the propensity of art to reflect and replicate the artist—one's self-image, fantasies, fears, and

obsessions—is fundamental to understanding multiple DeLillo works for page and stage. It is particularly telling that DeLillo identifies this aesthetic of projection, reflection, and deflection not by pointing to it in his own work (where it is manifestly evident), but by locating it in the work of an artist he admires (Bernhard), who was himself identifying with another artist they both admired (Gould). Most revealing of all, DeLillo conceptualizes this relationship between creator and creatures in terms of *acting*: “Where is the novelist? He is sitting in a room in Vienna or Salzburg writing lines for a narrator who is not him, but is him, but isn’t. In the end the narrator is an uncredited actor playing Thomas Bernhard in much the same way that a flesh-and-blood actor plays Glenn Gould in *Thirty Two Short Films*” (“Counterpoint” 42). The sequestered novelist draws closer to the self by creating and acting out the roles of other selves, a performance of self-dialogue. As Samuel Beckett, in *Endgame*, described the primal creative impulse, “Then babble, babble, words, like the solitary child who turns himself into children, two, three, so as to be together, and whisper together, in the dark” (126). *The voice you have to answer is your own*. Through his penetrating meditations on the art of others in “Counterpoint,” DeLillo provides his clearest articulation of the performative aesthetic that animates his late work, an approach he had already begun developing in the earlier novella *The Body Artist*, and a method he subsequently returned to in variant form in the play *Love-Lies-Bleeding*.

Readers enter the novella *in medias res* amidst breakfast banter between a husband and wife. We cannot appreciate the significance of this encounter until the obituary appended at the chapter’s end. The breakfast scene chronicles the final morning Lauren Hartke spent with Rey Robles, her filmmaker husband who committed suicide later that same day. Lauren is identified as “the body artist” at the conclusion of Rey’s obituary (*Body Artist* 31). In retrospect there are several prior indications establishing her habits of mind as a performance artist. She does not simply browse the newspaper; she absorbs the stories and is gathered into the lives of people she reads about. “She tended lately to place herself, to insert herself into certain stories in the newspaper. Some kind of daydream variation” (16). “Variation” here connotes contrapuntal

experiments in rearrangement like those expressed musically in the *Goldberg Variations*. At times it is difficult to determine who is rearranging whom. Is Lauren projecting herself into the lives of others? Or is she hyper-receptive to being acted upon by the experiences and voices around and within her? “She had a hyper-preparedness, or haywire, or hair-trigger, and Rey was always saying, or said once, and she carried a voice in her head that was hers and it was dialogue or monologue [. . .] a voice that flowed from a story in the paper” (18). The boundary separating Lauren from others is porous, dappled with shadings of identity; where “an incident described in the paper seemed to rise out of the inky lines of print and gather her into it” (20), and where “there are people being tortured halfway around the world, who speak another language, and you have conversations with them more or less uncontrollably until you become aware you are doing it and then you stop” (21). Ink is to Lauren what drink is to an alcoholic: one story and she’s besotted with voices. Critic Mark Osteen has described *The Body Artist* as “DeLillo’s most penetrating analysis of the process of artistic generation” (65). One wonders how closely Lauren’s process of creative inspiration mirrors that of her author. Certainly the two share common talents, including a finely tuned ear for speech, a willingness to allow new work to develop slowly at its own pace, and an openness to following different paths and shapes dictated by the characters. However, a fundamental difference is announced in the title. DeLillo is primarily an artist of language, but Lauren is a *body* artist. Her body is her medium of expression.

Lauren maintains a rigorous training ritual to prepare her body for art. She stretches and strains her muscles, sands her skin, waxes off her body hair, and applies bleaching cream to her skin. “This was her work, to disappear from all her former venues of aspect and bearing and to become a blankness, a body slate erased of every past resemblance” (86). In the wake of Rey’s suicide, one might interpret her austere measures as symptomatic of unresolved grief; she is slowly dwindling to nothing, annihilating her past and erasing her identity. However, her training regimen was apparently well-established long before Rey’s death. Her discipline and commitment cannot merely be dismissed as melancholia. She certainly suffers for her art, but she also makes

an art of suffering, much like Kafka's hunger artist, whose influence is palpable throughout *The Body Artist*. Furthermore, Lauren's willful erasure serves a practical artistic function. She aspires to become a blank cipher or tabula rasa in preparation for reinscribing her "body slate" with new characters. Her process sounds comparable to a painter priming a new canvas, or DeLillo rolling a clean sheet into his trusty Olympia typewriter.

In the final analysis, however, Lauren's body cannot be reduced to the same object status as a canvas or a piece of paper—it is a body; she is a living, feeling person. Corporeality and mediation emerge as major sources of tension in *The Body Artist* after Rey's death. For all the seeming banality of the opening breakfast scene, the first chapter establishes that Lauren was *not* a solitary artist so long as she had Rey. She has her voices too, yes, her inner murmur and the vicarious voices she weaves together in "daydream variation." But as DeLillo subtly emphasizes in the breakfast scene, Lauren experiences most people and events at a distant remove. She encounters others via the newspaper in narratives that are already mediated. The singular, sustaining exception is Rey. She is grounded by direct contact with the material body of her husband. *The Body Artist* is DeLillo's shortest novel, but it is also his most sensual, crackling with supercharged physical sensations. For instance, when Rey lights up a cigarette at the kitchen table, it sends Lauren into a sensual reverie about his body: "It was agreeable to her; the smell of tobacco. It was part of her knowledge of his body. It was the aura of the man, a residue of smoke and unbroken habit, a dimension in the night, and she lapped it off the curled gray hairs on his chest and tasted it in his mouth. It was who he was in the dark, cigarettes and mumbled sleep and a hundred other things nameable and not" (21-22). Rey helps to anchor Lauren bodily in the material world, and she suddenly becomes unmoored after his suicide.

Enter Mr. Tuttle. After Rey's suicide Lauren returns to their rental home and discovers a small male of indeterminate age and aspect. She nicknames him "Mr. Tuttle" after an awkward science teacher from high school. The silliness of the name bears no resemblance to the seriousness of his impact on Lauren. Perhaps DeLillo intended "Mr. Tuttle" as a rough homophone for

"Mortal" or "Mortality," for Lauren soon associates him with her dead husband. Not that he looks or acts like Rey at first. She initially mistakes him for a sandy-haired child. Even after she concludes that he is older, he retains the air of a sleepy foundling, a perversely inscrutable variation on Goldilocks. It is his voice that eventually binds him to Rey. When Mr. Tuttle first attempts to speak in his own voice, his stilted gibberish is barely decipherable. His first words, "It is not able" (45), sound less like a Zen koan and more like a poor imitation of "E.T. phone home." At one point Lauren wonders half-jokingly, "Am I the first human to abduct an alien?" (85). But she snaps to attention when she discovers that Mr. Tuttle can recite entire monologues and dialogues involving Rey. At first she suspects he was eavesdropping on conversations and memorizing them with pitch-perfect mimicry: "This was not some communication with the dead. It was Rey alive in the course of a talk he'd had with her, in this room, not long after they'd come here. She was sure of this" (63). Later she suspects Mr. Tuttle is capable of channeling her dead husband in the present, conjuring him from the dead. "It was Rey's voice all right, it was her husband's tonal soul, but she didn't think the man was remembering. It is happening now. This is what she thought. She watched him struggle in his utterance and thought it was happening, somehow now, in his frame, in his fractured time, and he is only reporting, helplessly, what they say" (89).

Is Mr. Tuttle the hallucination of an unhinged mind? Is he a warped external projection of Lauren's inner fantasy to reunite with Rey? David Cowart observes, "So far as the reader of [*The Body Artist*] knows, only Lauren ever lays eyes on or converses with her visitor" (204). He further speculates that "in Mr. Tuttle Lauren encounters, as a projection of her own unconscious, the artist in herself, temporarily obtunded or disoriented by 'late catastrophe'" (206). To be sure, no rational explanations adequately account for this strange visitor, or even confirm his existence. Yet Lauren is drawn inexorably to Mr. Tuttle, not as a ghost or a delusion, but as a substantial corporeal being. She regards him as a bodily portal through which she might reestablish a carnal connection with Rey. In one of the most revealing scenes in *The Body Artist*, Lauren expresses her desire to physically enter Mr. Tuttle as a means to reenter Rey:

Rey is alive now in this man's mind, in his mouth and body and cock. Her skin was electric. She saw herself, she sees herself crawling toward him. The image is there in front of her. She is crawling across the floor and it is nearly real to her. She feels something has separated, softly come unfix'd, and she tries to pull him down to the floor with her, stop him, keep him here, or crawls up onto him or into him, dissolving, or only lies prone and sobs unstopably, being watched by herself from above.

She could smell his liniment on her body, his muscle rub, and then he was all through talking. (89-90)

This passage captures Laurent's abject desperation, her physical need, her loosening grip on the distinctions between fantasy and reality, and her identity dissociation. But notice an important rhetorical move here: "She saw herself, she sees herself crawling toward him." The narrative voice abruptly shifts from past- to present-tense verbs and continues on in that new temporal mode for the rest of the paragraph—only to plummet back into past tense in the final sentence, after the spell is broken. This passage signals one of Delillo's primary preoccupations in *The Body Artist* and in much of his twenty-first century work: *Time*.

The novella opens with the line: "Time seems to pass" (9). The present verb tense is again notable, but more striking still is the verb itself. Time only seems to pass? Delillo began testing the boundaries of time and space in his fiction as far back as the mid-seventies in *Ratner's Star*. In recent years the relationship of time and space has become a recurring preoccupation. Samuel Chase Coale has studied the Harry Ransom Center's archival material and found abundant evidence of Delillo's interest in quantum theory and physics. "There were his interpretations of and quotations from articles on Einstein, Bohr, Heisenberg, Schrödinger, and others" (Coale 5). He connects the opening of *The Body Artist* with a manuscript note quoting Hermann Weyl: "The objective world simply is; it does not happen" (cited in Coale 7). The idea here is that time does not unfold gradually in a chronological sequence of

moments but instead already exists all at once on what we might conceive of spatially as an infinite plane, encompassing all past, present, and future. To draw a comparison near at hand, think of time as a book. All the things that happen in that book have already been committed to print. At any given moment in the reading experience, future events that one has not yet read are already fixed (just flip ahead and see), while events that have previously happened continue to exist (flip back and they're still there). These bedrock truths apply to all books, of course, but few novelists exploit this built-in space-time dimension as deftly as Delillo.

His clearest articulation of the quantum theories undergirding his recent work came in a 2003 radio interview with Michael Krasny. The interviewer asked about the subject of déjà vu in *White Noise*, and Delillo began to open up about his broader theories on time. "Time is a great mystery to most people, including philosophers, cosmologists, and others. [...] It occurs to me, and I think it has occurred to physicists who work in this particular area, that it may well be that time exists—past, present, and future—simultaneously. And that it is simply a question, for the sake of our self-protection, of completely reformulating the nature of time in order to survive."

Delillo then posed the questions, "Is it possible that the experience of déjà vu is somehow connected with the idea that time exists in one continuum, and that it is just a question of our gaining access to it? Is it possible for us to gain access to the future? Does déjà vu suggest that we are able to do this, that there is some kind of leakage from the future into our current sense of perception?" Krasny asked what Delillo's instincts as a novelist told him with respect to time as a single pre-existing continuum, and his reply was fascinating:

I think there is much on this subject that we simply haven't been able to understand. It's the way in which we construct our own universe. The way that the universe itself is totally different, we are told, from our perceptions of it. We create the universe in a way; we create the world around us. And I don't know that anyone can attempt to discuss this in any great, accurate detail. But it seems

to be a fact, if we can use the word "fact," not that it doesn't exist, but that it exists in a way that may be totally alien to the ability of humans to survive it.

As an artist, DeLillo has long been a creator of worlds, and he often writes about artist-characters who are themselves creators of worlds inside worlds. But here DeLillo radically extends his understanding of creation to include all of us. Each human effectively creates a variation of the world through individual perceptions. Furthermore, we distort time and space because we could not survive staring into the Medusa's head of a space-time continuum which retains our ineluctable past, augurs our inevitable future, and contains our unavoidable death.

Mr. Tuttle is a creature fully sleeped in this alternate understanding of time. He finds himself stranded in our alien world and struggling to adapt, like a Tralfamadorian stuck in the amber of human time. The first hint of Mr. Tuttle's different temporal bearings comes through his inability to grasp verb tense. He observes, "It rained very much," but Lauren corrects him: "It will rain. It is going to rain" (46). He apprehends past, present, and future equally and at once, rendering meaningless distinctions between what has happened, what is happening, and what will happen. She gradually speculates, "Maybe this man experiences another kind of reality where he is here and there, before and after, and he moves from one to the other shatteringly, in a state of collapse, minus an identity, a language [. . .]. She thought maybe he lived in a kind of time that had no narrative quality" (66, 67). Time that has no narrative quality is time that does not happen but merely is. Connecting Mr. Tuttle's worldview with the opening passage of the *The Body Artist*, Lauren reflects, "Time is supposed to pass, she thought. But maybe he is living in another state. It is a kind of time that is simply and overwhelmingly there, laid out, unoccurring, and he lacks the inborn ability to reconceive this condition" (79). Lauren resists Mr. Tuttle's relationship with time. Yet she is so mired in grief and thwarted desire that she is gradually forced to reconsider the existence of time that does not pass.

Ultimately, Lauren learns to work through her suffering and assimilate Rey's death. Art is crucial to that process. Mr. Tuttle becomes the principal muse and culminating character for a new work of performance art. During her interrogations of Mr. Tuttle, Lauren began recording their conversations, which eventually served as a kind of artist's journal guiding her toward the development of *Body Time*. As this suggestive title indicates, Lauren brings her distinct connection with the body into contrapuntal dialogue with Mr. Tuttle's distinct connection with time. DeLillo includes a review of the piece by Lauren's friend and theater critic Mariella Chapman titled "Body Art in Extremis: Slow, Spare and Painful." The reviewer observes, "Hartke clearly wanted her audience to feel time go by, viscerally, even painfully" (106). Lauren explains, "Maybe the idea is to think of time differently [. . .]. Stop time, or stretch it out, or open it up. Make a still life that's living, not painted" (109). The idea of a "still life that's living" perfectly captures the demands Lauren makes of her body, manipulating herself like an organic canvas for portraying various characters. As Chapman describes it, "Hartke is a body artist who tries to shake off the body—hers anyway [. . .]. Hartke's work is not self-strutting or self-lacerating. She is acting, always in the process, of becoming another or exploring some root identity" (107). Paradoxically, the more Lauren removes her ego from her art by surrendering herself to other bodies and voices and allowing them to speak and move through her, the closer she comes to reintegrating her shattered identity.

Commenting on the novella's experiments with identity, Mark Osteen observes, "*The Body Artist* also traffics in metempsychosis: both the literary kind, whereby patterns and motifs from previous texts are revived, and the human kind, whereby human beings return to life in altered forms" (65). Focusing on *The Body Artist's* experiments with time, David Cowart argues, "Mr. Tuttle is not unique in either his shuttling backward and forward in time or his ability to act as a recording device to replicate or reproduce the world's discourse. The literary artist can do these things as well—and in narrative that need not proceed in a linear fashion" (205). Both critics are right in terms of DeLillo's literary achievement, but Lauren's achievement within the novella

hinges upon the specifically *performative* nature of her art as distinct from the literary. DeLillo once admitted in an interview with Adam Begley, "When my head is in the typewriter the last thing on my mind is some imaginary reader. I don't have an audience; I have a set of standards" (91). But for Lauren, who seeks to restore her severed physical connection to the world which she lost when Rey died, the presence of a live audience is an essential component to her performance art. The relation of live performance to time is crucial as it is a temporal relation that is significantly different from printed fiction. One does not have to be a ghost, a space-time alien, or a supernatural founding to inhabit a reality that simultaneously encompasses past, present, and future: one can be a performing artist. Each performance takes place on a fixed stage and "seems to pass" in the singular, unprecedented, unrepeatable *now*. And yet, no matter how fully the performer immerses herself in the now, there is no escaping the fact that a version of tonight's show happened last night, and another version will happen again tomorrow night. Though a hundred incremental changes could differentiate Saturday's performance from Friday's and Sunday's, the physical stage and the written script generally remain fixed. Thus, the conditions of stage performance constitute a relatively stable space-time continuum encompassing past, present, and future.

DeLillo has worked in the performing arts as a playwright, though he has not achieved nearly the same level of critical and popular acclaim in this medium. His full-length plays *The Day Room* (1986), *Valparaiso* (1999), and *Love-Lies-Bleeding* (2005) have all received multiple productions and largely positive, if muted, receptions. Of these plays, the latter work about the dying artist Alex Macklin is the most accomplished, though also the least understood. Reviewer Tony Adler snarkily voices the gripes of many detractors in his review of the Steppenwolf production of *Love-Lies-Bleeding*:

As a playwright, Don DeLillo makes an excellent novelist. This isn't as damning as it sounds. There's some merciless, meticulous writing in DeLillo's new *Love-Lies-Bleeding*. The language is interesting for the way it traps anguish in frozen, formal diction. The characters

each have their own weight and mass. The premise provides an elegantly simple mechanism for exploring primal issues. It's all very strong. It just doesn't belong on a stage.

Adler rehearses familiar complaints about static, verbose fiction writers who try and fail to translate their talents from page to stage, and then he sends DeLillo's would-be audiences across town to see a better show:

Coincidentally, you can find out how a real playwright handles the same formal challenge by seeing Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women*, currently at the Apple Tree Theatre. Albee takes a comatose old lady and divides her up into her young, middle-aged, and dying selves, giving them rein not only to argue with one another but to scare the old lady's son as he observes his deathbed vigil. The result is funny, profound, and visually dynamic. Theatrical.

Adler is right to compare DeLillo and Albee's formal challenges—staging a death by splitting the dying person into three selves—but he ignores the metadramatic dimensions of *Love-Lies-Bleeding* which prevail in DeLillo just as surely as in Albee. Critics and audiences have generally been so distracted by the topical euthanasia plot that they have failed to appreciate *Love-Lies-Bleeding* as a bold theatrical experiment in time and self-dialogue.

DeLillo uses the same term to describe Alex Macklin that he applied to Lauren Hartke's body art: *in extremis*. That is, at the furthest extreme, in the final agony, at the brink of death. Having suffered two massive strokes, the seventy-year-old Alex can no longer speak or walk. But his younger selves—the sixty-nine-year-old Alex (featured in Act 1, Scene 1 and Act 3, Scene 9) and the sixty-four-year-old Alex (featured in Act 2)—still exist at other points in the space-time continuum and remain capable of speech and movement. DeLillo never explicitly spells this division out in the dialogue of the play. Instead he uses the medium-specific tools of theater to communicate this concept. The stage directions note, "Two actors appear as Alex. One plays the

character in three episodes that precede the main action. The other plays Alex *in extremis*, a helpless figure attached to a feeding tube" (1). Alex *in extremis* sits separately on the side of the stage in distinct lighting. He occupies the same stage at the same time while an episode from his past is reenacted in the opening scene. Unlike Albee's *Three Tall Women*, the three Alexes never directly interact with each other in *Love-Lies-Bleeding*. In the first scene neither the seventy-year-old catatonic Alex nor the sixty-nine-year-old partially incapacitated Alex overtly acknowledges the other's presence. Nevertheless, the audience is made visually aware of their simultaneous presence. We are effectively positioned to see through the temporal perspective of Mr. Tuttle. This dramaturgical precedent establishes the conceptual paradigm for understanding the entire play.

Within the closed, inner world of *Love-Lies-Bleeding*, the action is filtered entirely through the perspective of the artist Alex Macklin. His gaze is fixed squarely upon his death. The first scene turns back the calendar a year, just after Alex suffered his first stroke. The sixty-nine-year-old Alex fixates on the first dead body he ever saw as a child, a man on a New York subway train. He recalls to his wife Lia: "Gray like an animal. He belonged to a different order of nature. The first dead man I'd ever seen and there's never been anyone since who has looked more finally dead" (9). What was becoming clear to Alex after his first stroke, and what is manifestly evident for Alex *in extremis* after the second stroke, is that he, too, will eventually become a gray, lifeless, dying animal. As an eleven-year-old kid, he received his first premonition of death, and the play dramatizes his fulfillment of the prophecy.

Viewed from a perspective that comprehends time as always already existing, Alex is both always alive and already dead; it's just a question of what position he occupies in the space-time continuum at a given point. Here Murray Jay Siskind's theories on *déjà vu* in *White Noise* are apropos for *Love-Lies-Bleeding*: "Why do we think these things happened before?" Murray asks. "Simple. They did happen before, in our minds, as visions of the future. Because these are precognitions, we can't fit the material into our system of consciousness as it is now structured," Murray theorizes that in *déjà vu*, "We're

seeing into the future but haven't learned how to process the experience. So it stays hidden until the precognition comes true, until we come face to face with the event. Now we are free to remember it, to experience it as familiar material." This phenomenon is felt most sharply with respect to our inevitable mortality: "Most of us have probably seen our own death but haven't known how to make the material surface. Maybe when we die, the first thing we'll say is, 'I know this feeling. I was here before'" (145-46). Seventy-year-old Alex is in a position to look back at the dead man on the subway and appreciate this as a premonition of his own death. He's been here before. *Love-Lies-Bleeding* consists largely of a dramatic staging of what Alex *in extremis* sees when he goes back to the future of his death.

Does Alex see a preordained future, or does he creatively construct it? That is, does Alex flip ahead to read a script already etched in the stone of time? Or does he use his imagination to invent that script—a subjective fantasy of what his loved ones might say and do to hasten his death, and a self-dialogue with his former and future selves? The most honest answer is that DeLillo invites both interpretive possibilities, mutually exclusive though they are, and allows both to remain open. As an artist, as a creator of worlds, DeLillo equips his artist-figures with the same creative license to generate their own worlds. Like Beckett before him, who transformed the theater space into a mindscape in plays like *Endgame* and *Not I*, DeLillo's *Love-Lies-Bleeding* may be understood as a self-contained solipsistic fantasy world of Alex's own device. The episode that lends greatest credence to this interpretation is Act 2.

Set six years prior to the main action, Act 2 features sixty-four-year-old Alex in full health and top form, flirting with his ex-wife Tonnette and discussing on his latest artwork. He reluctantly explains to her why he has a crew blasting into a desert mountain: "A room, a cube. I don't have a name for it. First we cut a passage in. A tough narrow entranceway, cramped, with jutting rock. [...] A chamber, a cubical room. Fashioned out of solid rock. Precise dimensions. A large empty room. Six congruent square surfaces. Painted. Ocher and amber. Old colors. Burnt brick. Lampblack. All six surfaces, every square inch" (59). On one level, this artwork represents the apotheosis of Del-

illo's classic "men in small rooms" conceit. On another level, the project fits within a much older tradition of cave art. In an earlier scene (chronologically later), Alex's wife Lia recalls his deep admiration for the cave temples of Ajantia in India (37). On the meta-level of self-dialogue, Alex's cave room also harkens back to the underworld caves of *Rahner's Star*. There, Jean Sweet Venable connects ancient cave art to a primal artistic confrontation with mortality:

wondering what it would take to "remember through" the ochre and soot of cave art to the very reason why these earliest of artists descended to the most remote parts of caves and applied their pigments to nearly inaccessible walls, the intricate journey and the isolated site being representative perhaps of the secret nature of the story told in the painting itself, all fiction, she thought, all fiction takes place at the end of this process of crawl, scratch and gasp, this secret memory of death. (394)

Alex seems to have been remembering his death for much of his life, and there is no mistaking the morbid implication of his underground room as a self-constructed grave. Toinette reminds him that he has been germinating this idea for years. She recalls him talking in bed about "Art that's hidden in a mountain. An incredible, you said, sort of stone enclosure that you would drench with paintings of your dreams" (60). Alex harbors doubts about his plans, fretting "Should the room be painted at all? I have my doubts. I always have my doubts. The paint's a mistake. The paint is excess. A bare room inside a mountain. [...] I want to throw off doubt, stop thinking, stop caring, just be, just work. Throw off who I am, goddamn it. A bare room without a signature" (61). If Alex is digging his own grave, he seems determined to make it an unmarked one. Like Lauren Hartke, he struggles to remove ego as an obstacle to creating his art. He longs to erase the epitaph from his headstone, detach the dreamer from the dream. In Act 3, Lia laments, "What powerful work he had it in mind to make. Untitled, unfinished. But not nothing" (83). This eulogy implies that Alex's greatest work was never completed.

Or was it? A variation of Alex's artistic vision to construct an inner sanctum for his dreams may ultimately be realized, not inside a desert mountain, but in the theater itself. The hermetically sealed auditorium lends itself to appropriation as a solipsistic dreamscape. Bert O. States famously characterized the phenomenology of theater as "great reckonings in little rooms." The little room that hosts a production of *Love-Lies-Bleeding* is capable of housing no less than the psychic immensity of Alex Macklin's mind reckoning with death. *Milumino d'immenso*. Alex and Toinette mull over possible English translations of this verse from Giuseppe Ungaretti: "I glow, I shine, I bathe myself in light," begins Alex. "I turn luminous in this vast space." Toinette counters, "Do we want space in the physical sense? Or spiritual immensity? Something unnamable." But Alex cautions, "Let's not get too ambitious. We'll keep it local. This space and this light" (64). In the literal and the metatheatrical senses, *this* space and *this* light is a phenomenological self-reference to the performance conditions on stage as those lines are being delivered, a stage coterminous with Alex Macklin's mind.

Like so many DeLillo works, *Love-Lies-Bleeding* bends back on itself to end more or less where it started. The final exchange picks up the conversation between Alex and Lia that began the play, with the sitting figure hovering again on the periphery. Alex emphasizes his growing detachment from life. Lia tries to keep him grounded in the real through physical touch—playing Rey to his Lauren—but he is irreversibly losing his grip on the present: "You're the one blessing I know. All I can see and hear. The last of the body. There's more of you than there ever was of me. Everything's running backwards now. This is what consciousness is beginning to mean" (94). The body artist Lauren Hartke moved through death by way of art to return to life and reintegrated identity. In this later corrective variation, Alex Macklin withdraws further from others as he approaches death, culminating in radical detachment. The play's closing image starkly depicts "The sitting figure in isolation" before fading to black (97). One could read this final tableau as an image of death, Alex's final isolation fading into the void of darkness. But it is crucial to note how this concluding image brings the play full circle back to its beginning, a cycl-

cal movement in time which does not suggest termination so much as repetition. From his very first excursion into drama, DeLillo has been attracted to theater as a medium for experimenting with cyclical time. In an interview about his first play, *The Day Room*, he told Mervyn Rothstein, "it seemed natural to me beginning a play that theater itself would be one of the subjects I was interested in" (21). Elaborating upon the metadramatic elements that appealed to him, he added, "I'm interested in the way the play forms a kind of unending circular structure—it bends back on itself" (23). By the time he conceived *Love-Lies-Bleeding* almost twenty years later, DeLillo had matured into a playwright fully capable of self-reflexively exploiting the infinite loop of dramatic time. Tom Stoppard wisely noted in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* that every exit is an entrance somewhere else (28). The final exit of tonight's performance is an entry into the beginning of tomorrow night's performance in theoretically endless recirculation. Alex Macklin's end is also his beginning. He is not so much dead at the end of *Love-Lies-Bleeding* as he is poised to reenact his dying yet again.

In the liner notes to his *Goldberg Variations*, Glenn Gould addressed what he considered to be the timelessness of the piece, not in terms of its enduring legacy, but in terms of the internal structure of Bach's variation form. Gould proclaims, "the theme is not terminal but radial, the variations circumferential not rectilinear," resulting in "music which observes neither end nor beginning, music with neither real climax nor real resolution." These observations apply equally well to DeLillo's variations. His works for page and stage revolve around a persistent set of core themes in a radial, circumferential manner. His agenda is not to resolve the irresolvable themes of time, identity, death, and the function of art. Rather, through a relentless process of self-dialogue, he returns again and again to themes from his previous work and rearranges them into inventive new variant compositions.

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